CHICAGOANS OF THE YEAR | THE VILIFYING OF MICHAEL SACKS

CHICAGO

DECEMBER 2026



"I want to win. I want to beat everyone."

United Airlines CEO **Scott Kirby** isn't shy about plans to elbow out his former employer, American, at O'Hare.

Alleys and Ruins

A photographer trained his lens on Chicago's forgotten corners. He came back with plenty of stories, too.

By XAVIER NUEZ



Nuez's *Alleys & Ruins* No. 142: *Luv* (North Lawndale, 10 p.m.)

FOR 25 YEARS, I WANDERED THE RUNDOWN CORNERS OF North American cities late at night with my now-50-year-old Hasselblad film camera and my lights, exploring alleys and ruins. Chicago, where I've lived since 2010, was an ideal source for such locations. In these places, I crossed paths with society's outcasts. People would emerge from the shadows, drawn by the screaming light show of my photo shoots. I was chased by gangs and pushed around by drug addicts. I had guns pointed at me. When the police saw me lurking at night, I was often questioned and searched. Still, each time I was determined to walk out with something beautiful.

THE FIVE RAPID GUNSHOTS ARE LOUD AND CLOSE. I instinctively drop low, eyes toward the sound. My hand rises to my face. I look around. A couple of the people who are with me have dropped to one knee. We all hold still, listening.

Nothing.

"Holy crap." We all get back up.

I return to my camera and lighting equipment.

A few minutes later, flashing lights approach. It's a police car. The officers step out cautiously. One rests his hand on the top of his holstered side arm. The other barks, "What's going on here?"

I start explaining that we're setting up for a photo.

The cops look at us, then at each other, like none of this makes sense. And why would it? Who sets up in a dark, abandoned back lot in North Lawndale with bags and bags of expensive equipment in the middle of the night … to take a photo?

They glance through our gear, flip open a few bags, and realize we're telling the truth.

"Look," one of them says, "you guys take your photo. But be careful out here. We had a report of shots fired. Do you know anything about that?"

We tell them about the five shots that rang out earlier and point in the general direction. They nod, then get back in the car and speed away, looking for the shooter.

And I get back to work.

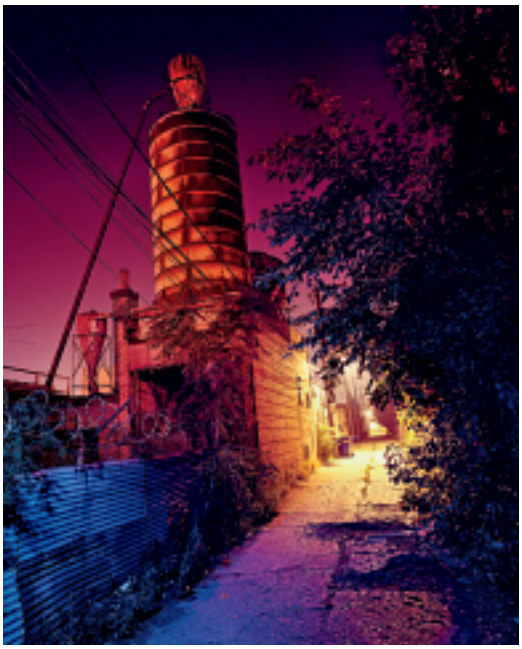
It's dark, but I can still make out the crumbling eyesore of a building that frames the lot. If all goes well, I'm going to make it pretty with bright colored lights. I choose the ones I'll be using from my big selection of spotlights and flash units. Next is the color scheme. I pull out the gels I need and start attaching them to the lights.

There's a shriek behind me. One of my helpers has just seen a big rat.

I'm about to begin the first of several 25-minute exposures (we're going to be



No. 62: *L Train* (South Loop, 2:15 a.m.)



No. 94: *Hallmark* (Noble Square, 1 a.m.)

here a while). During each, I'll be walking through the scene with a light in my hand, slowly building up layers of light and color. But of course, I don't want to appear in the photo. Over the years, I've built up a big bag of tricks. It's almost pitch black and I'm wearing a black hoodie, so it's hard for the lens to see me. As long as I keep moving during the exposure, I won't appear on the negative.

I flip the hoodie over my head and step into the scene to begin lighting the picture that will become photo No. 142 in my *Alleys & Ruins* series: *Luv*.

I'M SHOOTING NO. 62 UNDER THE L tracks in a South Loop alley with Phil Blass, an art student who will go on to help with many of my shoots. We've just finished when what appears to be a homeless man approaches us, eyes locked on the gear. "I gotta be in your movie," he says. I tell him these are still photos, but he ignores me. "You look like a great director. I need to be in your movie."

Phil decides to roll with it. "OK," he says. "Why don't you audition for us right now?"

The man nods, getting into character, but then stops and looks at me critically. "You're forgetting something. The camera? It's not pointing at me."

I laugh and swing the Hasselblad around. "OK, go ahead."

He waits, looking at me impatiently. "And? You've gotta say 'Lights, camera, action!' " So now, in a Chicago alley at night, I begin yelling "Lights, camera, action!" to a homeless man.

He instantly launches into his scene, wandering toward the street, screaming and throwing his arms in the air. "I don't want realism!" he yells, now in the middle of the street, stomping the pavement. "I want magic! Magic!" Suddenly a squad car rolls up behind him, slowing to a crawl. The man is lost in character and commits even harder. He turns to face the police car, screaming "Fire! Fire!" right at the bumper.

The officers are eyeing him with that look like, *OK, time to take this guy in*. I quickly rush toward the street, waving my arm, and catch the cop's eye. Smiling, I gesture casually to the "actor" and then back to my camera. "It's OK, sorry, he's with me. We're filming." The cops look at the tripod and drive on.

The man finishes the scene and walks back to us, breathless. "Do you realize how close you came to getting in big trouble?" I ask him. "The cops were right there."

He grins, tapping his temple. "I have eyes in the back of my head. Did you see them drive on by? Wasn't that intense? What a scene!"

I'M SETTING UP FOR NO. 94 IN NOBLE Square when a man and woman walk by us, stopping at the garbage bin visible in the picture. The man pulls the dumpster back, grabs some large cardboard pieces stashed behind it, and takes them around the corner a few feet farther up. He reappears soon after and walks past us again. A few minutes later, he returns with a big bag of bread rolls. He stops and asks what we're taking a picture of, and I ask him where he got the bread, since it's 1 a.m.

He tells me a local bakery throws it out. "I feed the rats with it. Look, I gotta keep 'em away from my wife, 'cause if I don't feed 'em, they come after us." He tells us how he tosses the bread over the fence on the other side of the alley, away from their cardboard home, where the rats gather.

"I love my wife more than anything, and I want her to have a good sleep. I'd do anything for her. Look, I been to jail

five times and she stuck with me through everything. I tell you, I'm the luckiest man alive. My wife's a good woman. She loves me. Ain't that somethin'? Look where we live," he says, motioning to the alley behind him. "This woman is truly a miracle. I gotta protect her."

He asks us if we could spare some money, and we give him a few dollars. He looks at the money and says, "Hey, I wanna give you guys somethin'."

He heads for his cardboard home and returns, giving each of us a big bag of condoms that he got from a nearby mission. We laugh.

"Why you guys laughin'? Don't laugh, man. This gift is from my heart. *It's from my heart*."

We stop laughing. "Thanks for the gift," I say. "I appreciate it." We shake hands, and he walks back down the long alley toward his beloved wife.



No. 72: *Zig Zag* (Loop, 10 p.m.)



No. 149: *Dumpster Dive* (Brighton Park, 10:30 p.m.)

A YEAR AFTER MOVING TO Chicago, I host a party in my studio for everyone on my local mailing list. A woman catches my eye. Her name is Nikki. We're chatting, and she asks, "Is it true you bring people on your night shoots?"

"Yeah," I say. "It helps to have another set of eyes in these locations."

She smiles at me. "Can I come?"

A few days later, we're at a spot in the South Loop where one L track crisscrosses over the other. I'm trying to find a good angle and decide to scramble up a steep slope leading to the tracks. Suddenly I hear the crackling and rumbling of the rails. There's a train barreling down on me.

I look down and spot a dumpster with its lid closed. It looks like a soft landing.

I am so wrong. I crash right through the plastic lid and land hard on the steel floor of the empty dumpster. I feel a sickening pop. I look down to see my foot twisted at a surreal, horrible angle. Adrenaline takes over; I grab my foot and somehow wrench it back. I'm limping badly, but I'm mobile.

That's the end of the shoot. I can barely walk, but neither of us wants the night to end.

We head to a nearby bar. Halfway through our conversation, Nikki gives me a look. "You don't remember me, do you?"

I freeze. "I'm sorry ... maybe?"

"Yeah. Last year I bought your photo *Zig Zag*. That's how I got on your mailing list. That's why I was at your party."

Zig Zag instantly becomes my favorite. A few days later we go on our first date, and seven years after that we're married.

I'M SNOOPING AROUND AN unusual pile of trash at night in Brighton Park. A shot can be anywhere.

"What are you doing here?"

I turn around. A police cruiser has stopped in the middle of this vacant dead-end street. The cop has the door open, one foot on the ground.

"I'm just looking for something to photograph."

The cop squints, not sure what to make of my response. Without taking her eyes off me, she says, "George, everything OK?"

From beneath this heap, I hear a muffled "Yeah, I'm good."

"You best be movin' on," the cop tells me.

"Uh, yeah, no problem," I say, nodding. I start walking toward a dark parking lot nearby in my continuing quest. The cop gets back in her vehicle, does a slow U-turn, and drives away.

I'm still searching in the parking lot for a shot when I hear a noise. I look back toward the trash heap 50 feet away, and sure enough, it's a home. A hairy, ragged figure – George, I presume – is stepping out for some air through a makeshift door that blended in with the heap.

He looks at me, and I raise my hand, signaling hello. He raises his hand, and I go back to my searching. C

Excerpted from Alleys & Ruins: From Breakdown to Beauty. *© 2026 by Xavier Nuez. All rights reserved.*